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Gregory Bateson and the OSS: World War II and Bateson's Assessment of Applied Anthropology

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This article uses documents released from the Central Intelligence Agency under the Freedom of Information Act to examine Gregory Bateson's work for the Office of Strategic Services during World War II. The primary document under consideration is a position paper written by Bateson for the OSS in November 1944. In that paper, Bateson outlined a number of methods and strategies that U.S. intelligence agencies might wish to consider using in the post-war period to continue to gather intelligence in India and to help maintain colonial order in India. This 1944 OSS position paper is discussed in order to shed light both on some of the largely undocumented work done by anthropologists during the war and to understand why Bateson returned to his overall negative assessment of applied anthropology in the post-war period.

Key words: applied anthropology, Gregory Bateson, OSS, WWII

In 1947, John Cooper estimated that, during World War II, as many one half of all professional anthropologists worked full-time in some war-related governmental capacity, while another quarter worked on a part-time basis (Cooper 1947). These anthropologists used their skills to fill hundreds of positions in governmental agencies ranging from the Office of War Information to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and they engaged in activities ranging from bureaucratic drudgery (Bennett 1947) to the cloak and dagger adventures of secret agents (Coon 1980).¹

As a part of a larger research project which investigates the impact of the Cold War on the development of American anthropology, I have used the Freedom of Information Act to gain access to hundreds of governmental records pertaining to anthropologists and anthropological organizations from a variety of military and intelligence agencies (Price 1997a, 1997b, and 1998). What emerges from this pile of documents is a very complicated picture of vastly different individuals with divergent wartime experiences. I am finding a greater level of ambivalence than most historical considerations of this period present. I am also finding that this first-sizeable-wave-of-self-

identified applied anthropologists faced many of the same frustrations that many contemporary applied anthropologists face. Primarily, these have to do with conflicts between the goals of anthropologists and sponsoring agencies. In this article, I discuss some of the experiences of Gregory Bateson at the Office of Strategic Services — as a way of examining some of the key aspects of the development of applied anthropology during the wartime period. Specifically, I am interested in examining how Bateson's wartime experience colored his view of applied anthropology in general, and I suggest that some of the ethical dilemmas Bateson encountered have their parallels in the contemporary world where we work as applied anthropologists.

Gregory Bateson and the OSS

The OSS was created by President Roosevelt on June 13, 1942, and was the direct institutional predecessor to the CIA. Over two dozen anthropologists worked for the OSS during the War, including: E. Wyllys Andrews IV, William Bascom, Gregory Bateson, Lloyd Cabot Briggs, Carleton Coon, Cora DuBois, Anne Fuller, Nelson Glueck, Gordon Hewes, Frederick Hulse, Olov Janse, Felix Keesing, Alexander Lesser, Edwin Loeb, Leonard Mason, Mark May, Alfred Métraux, George Murdock, David Rodnick, Morris Siegel, Richard Starr, David Stout, Morris Swadesh, and T. Cuyler Young.² There was a great variation in the type of work these individuals undertook — ranging from assignments as linguists, spies, budgetary managers, economic forecasters, and foreign news analysts. By far the most intriguing published account of any of the OSS anthropologists was that of Carleton Coon (1980) in his book,

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A North Africa Story: The Anthropologist as OSS Agent, in which he describes his experiences using his pre-war geographic and cultural expertise to help develop allied intelligence and counter-intelligence networks, and insurgency squads in war-torn North Africa.

From its creation onward, the OSS was a fundamentally new type of military-intelligence agency. Its Director, "Wild" Bill Donovan, saw the OSS as a new type of multidisciplinary intelligence agency which relied on a variety of creative and unconventional means of both collecting intelligence and undertaking covert actions. The OSS recruited the best and brightest from elite academic and social circles for its ranks. In many ways, Gregory Bateson was a natural candidate for the OSS. Since 1940, Bateson and his then-wife Margaret Mead had been developing and refining the methods used in their studies of "culture at a distance" (Yans-McLaughlin 1986a:196). These were the very sorts of techniques that the OSS was interested in using to understand and subvert the enemy.

Bateson was initially reluctant to work for a military or intelligence organization. It was his view that, when working for an intelligence organization — as with most applied projects — one is far from free to choose the scope of research, or what is actually done with the fruits of one's labors. Even before Bateson considered joining the OSS, he was troubled by the ethical questions raised by anthropologists using their knowledge as a weapon in war, or further — that social scientists could expect to have little say in what was done with their research. In 1941, he wrote that the war:

is now a life-or-death struggle over the role which the social sciences shall play in the ordering of human relationships. It is hardly an exaggeration to say...this war is ideologically about just this — the role of the social sciences. Are we to reserve the techniques and the right to manipulate peoples as the privilege of a few planning, goal-oriented and power hungry individuals to whom the instrumentality of science makes a natural appeal? Now that we have techniques, are we in cold blood, going to treat people as things? Or what are we going to do with these techniques? (Bateson 1942:84 — as quoted in Yans-McLaughlin 1986a:209).

While Bateson expressed second thoughts before and again after the war, surprisingly, the picture that emerges from examining the material in his OSS files show a dedicated, even enthusiastic intelligence operative *during* the war.

Bateson began the war working under contract at Columbia University for the OSS and later the US Navy as a Pidgin-English instructor for troops heading to the South Pacific (Yans-McLaughlin 1986a:197). His next post was as the "secretary of the Morale Committee" (Yans-McLaughlin 1986a:200). Finally, he served as a civilian "member of a forward intelligence u[n]it in the Arakan mountains of Burma from 1944 to 1945" (Bateson 1944).

Bateson spent much of his wartime duty designing and carrying out "black propaganda" radio broadcasts from remote, secret locations in Burma and Thailand (Lipset 1980:174), and also worked in China, India, and Ceylon (Yans-McLaughlin 1986a:202). The term "black propaganda" simply refers to a technique whereby an individual or group pretends to represent the positions of their enemy, and mixes a preponderance of facts with a careful seasoning of disinformation that will portray the enemy in a negative light. In this work Bateson applied the

principles of his theory of *schismogenesis* to help foster disorder among the enemy.

[He] helped to operate an allied radio station that pretended to be an official Japanese station: it undermined Japanese propaganda by following the official Japanese line but exaggerating it (Mabee 1987:8).

Carleton Mabee noted that,

Even though both Mead and Bateson were disturbed by the use of deceit in psychological warfare, Mead was not as upset by it as Bateson was. During the war and after, the naturally optimistic Mead never lost her basic faith that science, if responsibly applied, could contribute to solving the practical problems of society, whereas Bateson, more pessimistic by nature, and deeply upset by his wartime experience, emphasized that applying science to society was inherently dangerous, and that the most useful role of science was to foster understanding rather than action. These differences between them were reflected in the breakup of their marriage just after the war (Mabee 1987:8).

Gregory Bateson did much more than just design an elaborate regimen of anti-Japanese propaganda. He also helped analyze raw intelligence, wrote papers analyzing long-term intelligence strategies, and even engaged in secret maneuvers. His OSS file indicates that in August 1945 he volunteered for a "dangerous" ten day secret mission — for which he was decorated — that required him to sneak across enemy lines to try and rescue captured allied agents (Mosgrip 1945). The affidavit accompanying a recommendation for the award of the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Service Ribbon includes the following description of this mission:

...in connection with a compromised operation, Mr. Bateson volunteered to penetrate deep into enemy territory in order to attempt the rescue of three agents believed to have escaped after their capture by the Japanese. Mr. Bateson shared all the very considerable dangers of this operation and in view of his civilian status, his courage in so doing [resounds?] greatly to his credit (Mosgrip 1945).

The affidavit further remarks that Bateson's status as a civilian removed him from any responsibility to carry out such "clandestine operations against the enemy, deep in enemy territory and beyond any possible support from Allied forces" (Mosgrip 1945).

Bateson as Intelligence Wonk

To cast light on some of the intelligence work that Bateson carried out for the OSS, I will now discuss a report written by him in November 1944 on the topic of the wartime and assumed post-war functions of the OSS in the theater of India and South Asia (Bateson 1944). It is significant to note that I found a copy of this article not with the OSS archives, but the Central Intelligence Agency — the institution that *did* take over for the OSS at the war's end. This position paper illuminates not only the type of intelligence work some applied anthropologists in the OSS carried out, but also Bateson's approach to advising intelligence analysts at the OSS.

Bateson's primary concern in this OSS position paper was to advance the position that American diplomatic and intelligence policy makers should keep an

eye on longer range planning, we are here to promote such a state of affairs in [South Asia] that twenty years hence we may be able to rely on effective allies in this area (11/15/44:1).³

He begins by arguing that "it will actually pay the Americans to influence the British towards a more flexible and more effective colonial policy" (1944:2). In this paper, Bateson envisions that the post-war period will mostly look and function like it had in the pre-war period. He identifies two significant "faults in the pre-war colonial system" (1944:2). Bateson wants to strive for a new and improved colonial system, and starts by asking if it is possible to: "diagnose remediable faults in the British and Dutch colonial systems and can we present our diagnosis to the British and the Dutch in such a way that the system will be improved?" (Bateson 1944).

These "two weaknesses of the imperial system" (1944:5) are labeled the "lack of communication upwards from the native population to the white [population]" (1944:2), and the British failure in the area of the "delegation of authority" (1944:4). Each of these two points are discussed separately below.

(1) LACK OF COMMUNICATION UPWARD

In discussing how British colonialists traditionally received information from "natives" he notes that, "In the late 19th century and up to 1914 it was customary in British colonial governments to conduct monumental surveys of language, population, religion, caste, [and] village industries" (1944:2). He argues that, while these efforts were often flawed in their methodology and results, at least under this system "every District Commissioner was compelled to go and interview people in the native communities" (1944:2). At a minimum, this traditional system forced colonial managers to undertake some level of participant-observational contact with native populations. Despite the awkwardness and artificial pitfalls of these meetings, Bateson argues that colonial managers did acquire

some vivid awareness of what native life is about. He might not be able to convey this awareness in his books but he learned to feel with his elbows the trend of native thought (1944:2).

Bateson points out that after the First World War colonial managers abandoned these personal meetings with native populations, instead favoring more distant statistical approaches — and British managers suffered from this loss of first-hand interactive knowledge.

Next, Bateson discusses the past importance of information which colonialists gathered through intimate contact with their local mistresses. He notes that the strategic uses of these relationships have been relegated to the past due to a variety of factors.

With the improvement of transportation, the discovery of quinine, the development of sanitation, mosquito control and public health measures generally, it has become increasingly easy for the white man to have his

white wife and even children with him in the colonies. The presence of large numbers of white women relieves the official from the pinch of loneliness which formerly drove him to the native woman and at the same time the white women not unnaturally use their influence to build up strong moral sanctions against the taking of native mistresses — even to the point of ostracizing the guilty officials. As a result the more durable and more educative type of relationship with the native women has been reduced to a minimum and only the casual, impermanent — and educational[ly] useless — types of relationship persist (Bateson 1944:3).

In these passages, Bateson clarifies that the extent to which past British colonial authorities in India had established ground-up communication networks — including those with their indigenous mistresses — helped them to understand and control some of the features of Indian village life. The loss of these relationships between colonizer and colonized is noted in the context of loss of information, with the clear implication being that post-war colonial authorities would be wise to re-introduce some variety of such "ground-up" communication networks.

(2) THE BRITISH DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY: COLONIAL CODEPENDENCY AND PATERNALIZING THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

Next, Bateson discusses the overall British failure to delegate authority among the Indian population by drawing on startling imagery of Paternal-British-Colonialists and their Child-like-Indian Subjects. He begins by conjuring up caricatures of American and British differences in parenting dynamics to analyze the shortcomings of the British rule in India. He argues that the British could improve their colonial system by acting less like rigid British parents, and more like nurturing American parents. We are told that in Upper and Middle Class British households, parents "think of themselves as models who the children should watch and imitate," while in America, many of the parents come from alien cultures, so they are more content to watch their children and to learn from their offspring who achieve great things in this world they (the parents) imperfectly understand. Bateson stretches this comparison even further by noting that "the American family thus constitutes, in itself, a "weaning machine" (1944:4). In diametrical opposition to this is the codependent

English family [which] does not contain this machinery for making the child independent and it is necessary in England to achieve this end by the use of an entirely separate institution — the boarding school. The English child must be drastically separated from his parents' influence in order to let him grow and achieve initiative and independence (1944:4).

Bateson's analysis is arguing that the British would be more effective colonialists if they would become less like British parents and more like American parents. Though he does note the presence of indigenous anti-colonialist movements, he does not recommend moving towards dismantling the colonial system at war's end. Instead, he offers advice on how to improve it functionally — that is, to reinforce its longevity. Bateson clarifies that the U.S. should not side with the growing liberation movement and he advises that "we ought not to think of altering the imperial institutions but rather of altering the attitudes and

insights of those who administer these institutions” (1944:5).

This is in some sense a culture and personality based analysis of the differences in British colonial and American neo-colonial approaches to the administration of global patron/client relationships. Bateson is advocating that the longevity of the British presence in India would be strengthened in the post-war period if British administrators would but change the “personality” of the administrative bureaucracy.

Bateson's Recommendations

In the paper's conclusion, Bateson recommends that after the war the OSS should take four steps — to take advantage of these above mentioned “two weaknesses of the imperial system” (i.e., the lack of communication upward and the British delegation of authority). It is not exactly clear to what end these “two weaknesses” are to be put, but it is clear that they are not to be exploited as a means of ending the foreign-colonial rule of the Indian people.

Bateson recommends that: First, the OSS should gather as much intelligence as possible from British sources — while the wartime alliance is in place; Second, they need to undertake detailed analysis of pop culture — especially in terms of content analysis of Indian popular films — as a way of gauging popular sentiment; Third, and most importantly, America must learn from Russia's successes in conquering ethnic minorities by praising and co-opting aspects of their culture — on this point he specifically suggests that it might be possible to co-opt some components similar to the symbolic capital that Gandhi has used so successfully; and finally, Bateson suggests that the post-war OSS be sure to continue with its wartime education programs for colonialist authorities. Of course, the OSS was disbanded at the end of war. Or more accurately, it was transformed into the Central Intelligence Agency — the agency which kept the copy of Bateson's report until I gained a copy of it under the Freedom of Information Act (see Katz 1989; Smith 1983; Winks 1987).

Bateson's comments on point three reveal much about the tone of his wartime OSS work and are reproduced in full below:

(3) The most significant experiment which has yet been conducted in the adjustment of relations between “superior” and “inferior” peoples is the Russian handling of their Asiatic tribes in Siberia. The findings of this experiment support very strongly the conclusion that it is very important to foster spectatorship among the superiors and exhibitionism among the inferiors. In outline, what the Russians have done is to stimulate the native peoples to undertake a native revival while they themselves admire the resulting dance festivals and other exhibitions of native culture, literature, poetry, music and so on. And the same attitude of spectatorship is then naturally extended to native achievements in production or organization. In contrast to this, where the white man thinks of himself as a model and encourages the native people to watch him in order to find out how things should be done, we find that in the end nativistic cults spring up among the native people. The system gets overweighed until some compensatory machinery is developed and then the revival of native arts, literature, etc., becomes a weapon for use *against* the white man (Phenomena, comparable to Ghandi's spinning wheel may be observed in Ireland and elsewhere). If, on the other hand, the dominant people themselves stimulate

native reviva[l]ism, then the system as a whole is much more stable, and the nativism cannot be used against the dominant people.

OSS can and should do nothing in the direction of stimulating native revivals but we might move gently towards making the British and the Dutch more aware of the importance of processes of this kind (Bateson 1944:6-7).

The overall thrust of Bateson's four point recommendations is that, in the post-war period, United States intelligence agencies should gather as much intelligence as possible relating to the life ways of India and pop culture. Then, American policy makers could use this information — as the Soviets did in Siberia — to control the direction of native social and political movements. Here Bateson has prefigured the sort of psywar, culture-cracking approach to conquest that was popularized by CIA operative Edward Landsdale in post-war Vietnam and the Philippines (see Blum 1995; Jeffreys-Jones 1989). This sort of approach — where indigenous legitimate leaders were subdued by the polite attentions of institutions and persons connected to intelligence agencies — would become one the CIA's standard techniques of subversion and conquest (Stockwell 1978).

Conclusions: Interpreting Bateson's Post-War Assessment of Applied Anthropology

After the war — as Virginia Yans-McLaughlin put it — “Bateson returned...to his original negative assessment of applied anthropology” (1986a:202-203). After the war, Gregory Bateson consistently spoke of his OSS experiences in negative terms, but he did maintain ties with members of the intelligence community in the postwar period.⁴ While it is clear that he did resume his unfavorable view of applied anthropology, it is not clear *why* he reverted to this assessment. Put another way, I think a significant question is: Did Gregory Bateson dislike applied anthropology because it didn't work, or did it work and he just didn't like what had been done with it?

I believe that this is (in part) an answerable question. There is every indication that Bateson's OSS propaganda work was successful, and that his contributions to intelligence analysis were in line with the post-war policies that were soon adopted by the CIA—the OSS's postwar institutional successor. So, no — there is little to suggest that Gregory Bateson's wartime applied efforts didn't work, but there are indications that after the war he had misgivings concerning the application of this work.

As Bateson-biographer David Lipset reports, after the war Bateson complained that he was “very disturbed with the O.S.S. treatment of the natives...[and according to Geoffrey Gorer] he felt that he was associated with a dishonest outfit.” (Lipset 1980:174; see also Yans-McLaughlin 1986a:202-203). Carleton Mabee notes that Bateson became “uneasy” because he had no control over how the intelligence he collected would be used, and because “he [had] also engaged in deceitful propaganda, which made him even more uneasy” (1987:8).

In no small way was this post-war reaction limited to Bateson and his response to his work in the OSS. A number of anthropologists during and after the war were troubled by what

John Embree said some critics had called “scientific prostitut[ion]” (Embree 1945). This was a time when there was an open, often bitter, dialogue between applied and non-applied practitioners about concerns — as Laura Thompson put it — that anthropologists might soon simply become “technicians for hire to the highest bidder” (Thompson 1944).

Having some general knowledge about Bateson’s dislike of applied anthropology, I was surprised to find that he not only functioned well in the OSS, but that he seemed to have (in some measure) *enjoyed* his applied work during the war. In the post-war writings and correspondence of a number of other anthropologists who were emerging from the setting of “total war,” there are similar expressions of retro-dissatisfaction concerning their applied war work.

Indeed, many war-era applied anthropologist saw their work as simply using their skills to bring some relief to civilian victims of war. As Walter Goldschmidt noted of

the incarceration of [Japanese-Americans] “in the detention camps of the West, this was a case of rape, but the anthropologists who went into the War Relocation Authority felt that they could serve to ameliorate this situation even if they could not stop it, and this they did (1977:298).

I think that there are some meaningful generalizations beyond Bateson or the general World War II experiences of American anthropologists that can be gleaned from this consideration of his OSS work. I would suggest that it sheds light on an early form of one of the basic and potentially problematic-relationships between institutional patrons and anthropologist clients.

As Delmos Jones observed over two decades ago, “when policy makers don’t listen, this could mean [applied anthropologists] are not telling them what they want to hear” (1976:227). I believe that an implicit corollary of this proposition affected Bateson’s appraisal of the applied anthropology he had contributed to developing — namely that good relations with sponsors can occur when we do tell them what they want to hear. And further — to borrow from Bateson’s cybernetic model — that cycles of positive-feedback from sponsors (in this case the OSS’s hyper-reified-bureaucratic-world-view) can create situations where it is far easier to *coalesce* than *challenge* basic assumptions that should be challenged. In this case, basic assumptions such as the advisability of disseminating disinformation, using indigenous populations for self-serving ends, and advocating the continuation of an unjust dying colonial system.

I think that the institutional coalescence of the OSS’s bureaucratic structure made it easy for many of its applied anthropologists to undertake actions and reach conclusions they would not have in other circumstances. Bateson did what he was asked to do within the confines of the limited world view of his employers and, later, he regretted it.

If mid-century experimental sociology has taught us anything, it is that bureaucratic institutions and group contingencies can shape our behavior and beliefs in drastic ways. Whether it is the experimental work of Irving Janis, Stanley Milgrim, Solomon Asch, or Philip Zimbardo, a consensus emerges that: A combination of group pressure and role fulfillment combined with institutional feedback can merge to create powerful forces of institutional coercion.

It is not that Bateson was some-sort of a radical liberation-anthropologist either before or after the war (who was somehow subverted by the OSS): he was not. Indeed, he clearly held mostly liberal-social-democratic views — the point *is* that this applied work pushed Bateson from a comfortable state of political inaction into undertaking a variety of actions and positions he would not have otherwise. In the end, actions he regretted.

There is much in the as-yet-unwritten history of World War II applied anthropology that makes for a cautionary tale. But my work so far leads me to see in the body of this early applied work very contemporary misgivings expressed in terms so naked they give pause. These unresolved issues have been with us from the beginning — I think all that has changed is that we have gotten a bit better at not addressing them.

NOTES

¹ A critical history of anthropology during the World War II has yet to be written, though there are a number of sources on anthropological activity during the war. Among the essential considerations of American anthropology during World War II are: Beals n.d.; Bennett 1947; Coon 1980; Cooper 1947; Cowan 1979; Doob 1947; Drinnon 1987; Embree 1943; Foster 1967; Frantz nd; Goldschmidt 1979; Katz 1989; Linton 1945; Mabee 1987; May 1971; Mead 1979; Murphy 1976; Nader 1996; Simpson 1994; Smith 1983; Stocking 1976; Suzuki 1981; Winkler 1978; Yans-McLaughlin 1986a and 1986b.

² It is difficult to document the extent of anthropologists’ work during World War II. This listing of anthropologists employed by the OSS comes largely from obituaries published in the *American Anthropologist* and the *Anthropology Newsletter* with supplemental information coming from Herskovits (1950).

³ Of course, 20 years later America was neck deep in a number of Southeast Asian quagmires with thousands of American troops present in the region.

⁴ In fact, Bateson himself was an early participant in some of the CIA’s experiments with LSD in the 1950s. It was CIA employee [Harold] Abramson [who] gave Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead’s former husband, his first LSD. In 1959, Bateson, in turn, helped arrange for a beat poet friend of his named Allen Ginsberg to take the drug at a research program located off the Stanford campus (Marks 1979:120).

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